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Drama and Spirituality: Reflective Connections

Grainger, T. and Kendall Seatter, S. (2003)

Abstract

This paper illustrates the powerful role that drama can play in facilitating spiritual development. The opportunities offered through the experience of improvisation are examined through a detailed examination of a single drama session. The children's engagement in and reflection upon the drama are seen as sensitive vehicles to build a sense of community, increase self knowledge, develop empathy, search for meaning and purpose and experience a sense of the transcendent. Examples are given of children's responses, both oral and written, to illuminate possible reflective connections between drama and spiritual growth.

Introduction

It is the responsibility of schools to facilitate children's spiritual development in all subjects of the curriculum (Education Reform Act, 1989). Yet recent surveys suggest that both OFSTED and schools give inadequate attention to the promotion of children's spiritual development through subject teaching (Wenman, 2001). Furthermore, the reification of subject knowledge and detailed specification of curriculum content found in the National Strategies, the NC and QCA documentation may well have served to separate subjects rather than integrate them. However, there are ways of creating a more learning focused agenda (Bigger and Brown, 2000). This paper represents one attempt to do so and illuminates the potential of drama as an imaginative scaffold for spiritual development. Drawing on the view that an 'essential factor in cultivating spirituality is reflection and learning from one's experiences' (Copley, 2000) a powerful example of improvised drama from the primary classroom is used to explore spiritual development in action. The dual frames of engagement and reflection, core constructs in process drama are highlighted throughout (O, Neill, 1995).

Exploring the Potential of Drama in Spiritual Development

In classroom drama children search for meaning and purpose in fictional settings and learn more about the real world from their improvisational engagement in an imaginary one. Drama involves making and shaping new worlds and investigating issues within them, so it has considerable potential as a tool in the development of spirituality. The opportunity for 'innerstanding' (Heathcote & Bolton, 1995) and inhabiting the lives of others, enables children to experience safe emotional engagement and take part in creative explorations of secular and faith tales. In classroom drama, children create and experience a living narrative and examine it from within. Their teacher, often in role, accompanies the learners on this journey and uses a range of conventions to investigate the themes, characters, motives and meanings in the text. Such investigations can also support the creation of community, the development of self -knowledge and may involve opportunities to engage in

feelings of wonder and transcendence. Teaching and learning are more holistically encountered in the context of drama and elements of drama are recognisable in Bowness and Carter's (1999) description of the process of spiritual learning. They suggest there should be an,

“emphasis on intuition, experience, imagination, silence in the face of mystery, wondering, open exploration, being as well as doing, reflecting, giving ‘space for the spirit’, holism and making connections”. (p.226)

Improvisational classroom drama can encompass all of these features as it acknowledges that teaching and learning are not merely cognitive but emotional, aesthetic and ethical acts. To explore the opportunities which drama offers spiritual development, a vignette from the classroom is recounted and interpreted. It was undertaken with year 5 children, aged 9 and 10 and was based upon the persecution of the Israelites in Egypt, as recounted in the Bible, Exodus 1 and 2. As the drama unfolds, the learning is analysed and exemplified in relation to aspects of spirituality. These include meaning and purpose, transcendence, self-knowledge and relationships (NCC, 1993). In addition to the work of others, the ‘framework for children’s spirituality’ (Hay and Nye, 1998) formed an important reference point for the analysis. In order to hear the voices of the children and appreciate the power of the drama, the analysis and reflection is quite deliberately presented separately, it generally follows each section of the dramatic action.

The Context for the Drama

In essence, the tale tells of how the Egyptian Pharaoh at that time developed a sense of insecurity, amounting to paranoia over the number of Israelites in his land. Concerned, lest they should join his enemies or plot against him, he made them work as slaves. The people of Israel flourished however, so he ordered that the Hebrew midwives should kill all newborn males. The midwives, not wishing to become child murderers, tricked the Pharaoh and finally his soldiers were commanded to act. The story tells of how Jochebed and Amram, an Israelite couple, placed their son in a cradle of rushes and trusted God to look after him. Although this class had undoubtedly heard the tale of Moses before, this drama session sought to explore the social and moral issues in the narrative, as well as expand the children’s knowledge and understanding of persecution. Classroom drama does not require the learner to re-enact the known, but involves discovering the unknown and exploring situations, values, motives, thoughts and feelings. Although the session was not planned with the conscious aim of facilitating spiritual development, when the drama was examined the seemingly elusive nature of spirituality and the children’s learning in this domain became more evident. It is clear that improvisational drama may hold a valuable key to unlocking a range of processes, strategies and consequences for enriching children’s spiritual development.

‘It’s our land, our harvest, we should share it’: Spirituality as Community

Initially, the teacher sought to build a sense of community both fictionally and for real through the drama, which as Taggart (2001) intimates, must be a core practice for all

of us who desire spirituality in education. Hull (1995) insists that 'spirituality seeks to recreate community through participation in the lives of others' (p.132). In creating the drama context, the teacher helped the class build a sense of the place and the people involved. They discussed the kinds of jobs folk in the Egyptian farming community would do, mimed these, then worked in groups creating contrasting freeze frames to show farmers in times of plenty and of hardship. The teacher took on the role of an Egyptian foreman arriving in the fields to demand the 'first fruits' of the harvest as payment to the Pharaoh for the use of his land. As family groups the learners gathered together to decide what they would offer the Pharaoh. Immediately some began to grumble and complain, whispering amongst themselves about ways to avoid this tax or withhold their resources. An empty chair was used symbolically for children to give witness to the rest of the class about their motives, behaviour and attitudes at this time. Several voiced the view that the Pharaoh could not be trusted, and argued that once the pattern was established he would demand more, others felt the land belonged to all the people and its harvest should be shared.

Connections were then made to contemporary life, allowing a pause outside the imaginary frame. This reflective discussion was quite lengthy, and included the existence and fairness of council taxes, as well as giving up personal material possessions ,e.g. Gameboys and Nintendos, photos of loved ones and so on. As Nathan perceptively observed '*You could give away your photos 'cos they'll still be with you in your heart won't they?*'. The children's engagement and reflection in the drama had prompted imaginative connections to emerge in the form of text to life and life to text moves (Meek, 1988) and allowed the meanings they constructed to be both relevant and real. Within this empathetically created reality, the children were apparently demonstrating many of the implicit strategies (reasoning, imagining, moralizing) that researchers such as Hay and Nye (1998) argue are vital for a maturing spirituality.

'Why do you hate us so? We're equal people.': Self knowledge through relationships.

The harsh treatment of the Israelites and the Pharaoh's fear of their numbers was then examined further through a monologue, with teacher in role as the Pharaoh, observing the slaves building the stone cities of Raam'ses and Pithmon. The class enacted one of Pharaoh's troublesome dreams as a kind of ritual, with the teacher still in role and the children, (the Israelite spirits in his mind), advancing upon him in a circle calling out their grievances and worries. Their voices reflected a range of perspectives and views and included '*Why do you hate us so?*', '*Trust us, trust us*', '*We 're not your slaves, we're equal people*', '*What are you afraid of?*', '*You are not our master*', '*I'll never be your slave, never*'. The Pharaoh voiced his fears too as if in a nightmare and finally awoke calling for his ministers in alarm and anger. Paired discussion then prompted the class to consider the situation. What might the Pharaoh do next?

The conflicts and tensions now evident were opened up further in the second major phase of the drama (Grainger and Cremin, 2001) and the work began to grow in depth as the distinction between being and becoming became blurred. The teacher, still in role as the Pharaoh asked his ministers to bring forward the Hebrew midwives for he had 'important work for them to do'. The class clustered around in small family groups, watched a short piece of improvisation, in which the Pharaoh instructed the

midwives in hushed stage whispers to undertake a survey of all newly born male Israelites. Additional money was offered, and refused by one child and, almost before they were dismissed, the midwives returned to their groups spreading fear and panic. The immediacy of this action was clearly prompted by their concern and involvement in the unfolding events. The midwives questioned the Pharaoh's motives and distrust and rumours spread. Their spontaneous warnings reflect their emotional engagement at this moment in the drama.

'You have time to escape if you leave now, run'
'Get out, get out he wants us to do a survey, but he'll send his soldiers very soon I'm sure'
'Hurry you have no time to waste, that man cannot be trusted he'll murder your children'
'Leave your possessions and get out of here now'
'Get out, get out, he'll kill us all, it'll be a massacre'.

At this point it was clear the fiction had fully started, as the class accepted the responses of the midwives and reacted accordingly. The teacher's quick intervention to suggest freeze frames to depict their families' actions was immediately encompassed, and it was clear the children were 'caught in the present, bound by the past and impelled towards the future' in their drama (Bolton, 1995) In the midst of community it is argued one can discover one's true nature, both through relationships (Buber, 1987), and through the dual process of finding oneself and losing oneself within the greater whole. Although some would argue that spirituality has become unacceptably associated with the cultivation of the self (Hull, 1995), others would highlight the essential need for children to construct their own personal narratives in order to explore their place in the world (Erricker et al, 1997). Certainly from the point of view of drama teaching, the ascendancy of the collective is a significant feature, enabling both collaborative meanings to be wrought and individual insights to be accessed (Neelands, 1998).

'What have we ever done to them?': Exploring Meaning and Purpose

Many of the group depictions showed the Israelites in hiding, notes and quick diary entries were written which reflected the thoughts and fears of those awaiting the possible arrival of the soldiers. These reveal the affective involvement of the children, since although the world of drama is fictional, the children's responses and feelings became increasingly real as the pressure of the dramatic moment brought their feelings to the fore. It is clear too that the children used this writing to make sense of the situation in which they found themselves.

I don't know what is happening. My mum just told us to hide, my heart is beating so loudly surely they will hear.
I hear footsteps outside, who do they want? Just the boys? What have we ever done to them? I wish we had left when we had the chance.

The questioning stance reflected in these two examples shows how the meanings developed in the drama had begun to be considered. Improvised drama is a

particularly rich medium for exploring multiple meanings and the gaps in the text (Iser, 1978) which leave room for ambiguity and do not effect closure.

I cannot tell you where we are. But I have taken Thoremu to the best hiding place there is. Thoremu thinks its just a game. I told him it is and we have to be quiet or else they will find us. The soldiers are getting closer every minute. It's dark. I hear houses being ripped apart and babies screaming. I can't help myself I start to cry .

The power in the latter examples lies both in their reflective tenor and their emotionally positioned stance within the drama. Through sharing their writing and their views about the situation in reflective time outside the frame of the drama , it was clear that their strong feelings and imaginative involvement seemed to have fuelled the processes of identification and transformation. In discussing the perspectives of the terrified Israelites and connecting to the 'special fear' of hide and seek, scenes on the news and moments when parents had made them afraid the children were co authoring this text from the inside, making sense and constructing meaning together.

'It seemed like we were there. It felt so real': Feelings of Transcendence

The relationships built and examined thus far became central to the unfolding action as the teacher now narrated how the villagers reacted and how one young mother Jochebed, took her baby to the river Nile in a basket. The class made a circle, and the teacher in a slow and ritual manner placed a basket with a crumpled linen cloth in the centre of the circle. She suggested the mother may have left a keepsake in the basket and invited the class to leave a special object and say their farewells. Silence descended and gradually children stepped forward to speak. Their commitment and belief was evident in the integrity of the views expressed and in their slow, tentative gestures expressing variously regret, fear, pain and sorrow. This accords with Hull's (1997) notion that spiritual development happens not only in the positive and warm relationships, but through exploring relationships of pain and suffering as well.

Much time was spent in silent contemplation; broken only by another voice offering their thoughts and tokens. This stillness, when discussed afterwards, was not perceived to have been awkward, but was recognised by the children as a powerful element of the drama. *'It felt so real, I thought I'd never see him again', 'I kept thinking of losing my mum', 'It seemed like we were there', 'I liked the silence it made me think'*. Paffard(1973) from his work with sixth formers describes experiences considered as 'transcendental' as those which give a sense of timelessness or placelessness, as well as those involving an exceptionally intense form of aesthetic experience. Hay and Nye (1998) also explore this notion of transcendence as an aspect of spirituality, and work towards the development of 'mystery-sensing' to open up awareness of life experiences which are incomprehensible. The children's exposure to awe and fear through the engagement of their imaginations was probably central to this process. They were grappling with ultimate questions since the drama

had provided the space in which 'routine education is transformed into spiritual education' as they were 'brought to the threshold of ultimate meaning in the face of apparent absurdity' (Wright, 2000 p.11).

It is clear that the drama had taken these children beyond the moral exploration of persecution and that the significance of this section was evident to all involved. The atmosphere was charged, the contemplation tangible and the long silences filled with personal engagement.. In the final part of the drama, the resolutions phase, writing in role as Jochebed was undertaken, this also indicated that in the ritual, their attention had been unusually focussed on the present moment, perhaps this was a moment of 'holy ground' (Whitehead, 1929).

I don't want to leave you here but I have no choice. I would go with you if I could but that's impossible. Treasure this necklace for it will guard you my baby, it shall be by you forever, even in death. I pray we will meet again, be brave and take care my boy, I will always be with you in spirit in your heart.

Damon's writing was typical of the emotional investment and personal responses which were recorded in the quiet that followed the slow ceremonial farewell. The children's ideas and feelings were sensitively and authentically expressed with a real sense of the human spirit. After some reflective sharing of the writing in role, the ritual elements in the drama, (Pharaoh's dream and the farewell scene) and Jochebed's remarkable faith in God were discussed. This created an opportunity to examine the meanings and significance being attached to the apparent experience of transcendence (Long, 2000). The drama concluded with a reading from Exodus 1 and 2 and further discussion of the children's feelings in the two pieces of ritual.

Later that week the class also discussed parallel situations in the world and made freeze frames depicting situations of persecution, both past and present in the world. It seemed important that the children were given the opportunity to explore these issues further from within the relative safety of a 'distancing framework' (King, 1992). Exploration of feelings and emotions is an integral part of spiritual development, yet it is important that children are not made to feel personally vulnerable or exposed. The drama and the reflective discussions provided that safety net as the children were able to 'third-personize' whilst being given the space in which to reflect and 'quest for understanding' (Hay and Nye, 1998) within a communally shared context.

Conclusion

The moral dilemmas, spiritual concerns and ambiguous social issues that permeate faith tales make such stories very appropriate resources for exploratory classroom drama (Winston, 1998). In such drama, combined learning about religious narrative and spiritual awareness may be developed in a fluid and holistic manner. Such opportunities can empower children to become spiritually richer by releasing their human potential and recognising their capacity to learn in an integrated manner. Through its emphasis on group co-operation and relationships, the significance of the

feeling quality and the importance of the collective, drama can make an important contribution to spiritual development. As Webster (1983) argues, truth within spirituality is 'detected less by argument and proof and more by symbol, story, parable, poem, allegory, sounds, gesture, movement or form' (p.13). By involving children in the action and moving constantly between engagement and reflection, children stand both within and outside themselves in dramatic contexts. 'This type of emotional/cognitive distancing is the hallmark of drama' (Booth, 1996, p.141). It enables the learners to pause, to connect and to consider the text they have created, this reflective space can deepen their sensitivity to moral and spiritual issues. Within the creative and reflective endeavour of drama, meaning and purpose are explored and the chance to develop self knowledge and increased insight abound. It is clear drama and spirituality can enrich each other. As professionals we need to make fuller use of their symbiotic relationship in order to enrich children's learning journeys.

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